

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF  
MUSEUM STUDIES

GENERAL EDITORS: SHARON MACDONALD AND HELEN REES LEAHY

MUSEUM  
THEORY

VOLUME EDITORS

ANDREA WITCOMB  
KYLIE MESSAGE



WILEY Blackwell

# THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

General Editors: Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy

## **Museum Theory**

Volume Editors

**Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message**

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

*Museum Theory*

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

**Museum Theory**

Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message

**Museum Practice**

Edited by Conal McCarthy

**Museum Media**

Edited by Michelle Henning

**Museum Transformations**

Edited by Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips

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# THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

Collectively, these handbooks include over a hundred original, state-of-the-art chapters on museums and museum studies. As such, they are the most comprehensive review to date of the lively and expanding field of museum studies. Written by a wide range of scholars and practitioners – newer voices as well as those already widely esteemed – the *International Handbooks* seek not only to provide extensive coverage of key topics and debates in the museum field, but also to make a productive contribution to emerging debates and areas, as well as to suggest how museum studies – and museums – might develop in the future.

The number of high-quality contributors able and willing to write on museum topics is itself testimony to the state of the field, as was recognition by the publishers that the field warranted such a substantial work. Bringing together such a range and quantity of new writing about museums was accomplished through the deep knowledge, extensive networks, and sheer labour of the volume editors – Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message, *Museum Theory*; Conal McCarthy, *Museum Practice*; Michelle Henning, *Museum Media*; and Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Transformations*. All enthusiastically took up the mandate to go out and recruit those they thought would be best able to write useful and timely essays on what they defined as the most important topics within their area of remit. Their brief was to look widely for potential contributors, including unfamiliar, as well as familiar, names. We – and they – were especially interested in perspectives from people whose voices have not always been heard within the international museum studies conversation thus far. This breadth is also a feature of the expanded and expanding field itself, as we explain further below.

## **Diversification and democratization**

The editors of the four volumes that constitute these *International Handbooks* are based in four different countries – Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada; and contributors have their institutional homes in over a dozen more. Yet these numbers alone do not fully convey the trend to diversification that we see in these volumes, and in museum studies more widely. “Internationalization” is a term that might be used but does not, we think, adequately characterize what is involved. Certainly, there is more traffic between nations of ideas about museums and about how to study them. Debates travel from one part of the globe to another, with museums and exhibitions in one location being used as models for emulation or avoidance in another. The massive expansion of professional training in museum

studies that has taken place over the past three decades helps establish a shared discourse, not least as many students study away from their home countries or those in which they will later work. So too do texts in and about the field, certain key ones often being found on reading lists in numerous countries and also republished in successive readers. Such developments establish the basis for a conversation capable of transcending borders.

It is evident from the contents of *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, however, that the democratization runs deeper than the traffic of discourse and practice across national borders, and, in particular, that the traffic is more multi-directional than it was previously. Not only do contributors have their primary work bases in a range of different countries, and not only do many have experience of training or working in others, they also often give attention – sometimes through the direct engagement of collaborative work or study – to a wide range of groups and populations in a variety of countries, including their own. This seeks not merely to incorporate but also to learn from and be challenged by people and perspectives that have not been part of mainstream museological debate. The attention to the (not unproblematic) category of the indigenous is especially marked in these *International Handbooks*, most notably in the *Transformations* volume, although it also finds its way into the others. Like attention to other forms of absence from the existing mainstream museum conversation, this is symptomatic of a broader move toward finding alternative ways of seeing and doing, ways that both add to the range of existing possibilities and also, sometimes, unsettle these by showing how, say, particular theorizing or practice relies on unspoken or previously unrecognized assumptions.

Diversification takes other forms too. While these volumes are not organized by type of museum – a format that we think restrictive in its lack of recognition of so many shared features and concerns of museums – and do not use this as a classification of content, it is nevertheless clear that a great range of museum kinds, and even of forms that might not always be considered museums, or that challenge the idea of the museum as a physical space, are included here. Museums of art, history, and ethnography – and also those more general and eclectic museums that have sometimes been described as encyclopedic – have powered a good deal of museum theorizing and debate, and they are amply represented here. But they are accompanied also by examples from museums of natural history, science, technology, and medicine, as well as heritage sites and out-of-gallery installations. Alongside national museums, which were the backbone of much important theorizing of the role of museums in the making of national identity and citizenship, are numerous examples of smaller museums, some of which are devoted to a specific topic and others of which have a regional or local foundation and focus. These museums may be less well endowed with staff, buildings, or funds, but are nevertheless doing important, even pioneering, work that deserves attention from museum studies. That attention contributes not only to extending the range of types and cases but also helps to illuminate the

range of specific features of museums that need to be taken into account in formulating more comprehensive approaches. As many chapters across the volumes show, one size does not fit all – or, to put it better perhaps, one theoretical perspective or set of guidelines for practice, one apt choice of media or transformative activity, does not fit all types and sizes of museums. Adding more to the mix does not just provide greater choice but also helps to identify better what is at stake and what might be possible in different kinds of situations, constellations, or conjunctures (to use a word favored in *Museum Theory*). It helps those of us engaged in and with museums to get a better grasp on what is and might be shared, as well as on what is distinctive and needs to be understood in more fine-grained ways.

Another feature of diversification that deserves comment here is the temporal. There has been a considerable amount of outstanding historical research undertaken in museum studies and the *International Handbooks* both review some of this and contribute further to it. Such work is important in its own terms, helping us to understand better the contexts in which museums emerged and have operated, and the concerns, constraints, personalities, and opportunities in evidence in particular times and places. It also contributes in vital ways to contemporary understandings, both by adding to the range of cases available for analysis and by showing the longer historical trajectories out of which various current approaches and practices emerged. Sometimes – and there are examples in all of the volumes here – their message is salutary, showing that what seemed like an innovation has been tried before, and perhaps with the distance of time allowing a more critical perspective than might feel comfortable today. The past shows change but also continuities and the re-emergence, or even repackaging, of what has gone before.

## **Disciplinarity and methodology**

Such research shows the importance of historical method, and of history as a discipline, within museum studies, which brings us to the wider issue of disciplinarity and methodology. To talk of museum studies as interdisciplinary has become a truism. The volumes here are a clear illustration that those involved in museum studies have been trained in and may have primary institutional locations in a wide range of disciplines and areas of study, including anthropology, archaeology, architecture, area studies, cultural studies, economics, education, geography, literature, management, media studies, political science, and sociology, as well as history and art history. Beyond that, however, they are also carving out new niches, sometimes institutionally recognized, sometimes not, in areas such as digital curation, and creative technologies, as well as in art gallery, museum, and heritage studies, in various combinations or alone. Moreover, in addition to disciplines and a multitude of academic specialisms, practitioner contributors bring diverse professional



expertise in areas including exhibition design, community engagement, conservation, interpretation, and management.

Alongside the diversity of concepts and methodologies offered by different disciplines and different forms of practical expertise, is also the distinctive feature of museum studies – its engagement with the past, present, and future world of museums. Such work, to varying extents, confronts researchers and academics with the actual concerns, predicaments, objects, spaces, media, and people all, in various ways, involved in museum collections and exhibitions. Increasingly, this means actual collaboration, and the development of methodological approaches to enable this. Examples in these volumes include those who consider themselves to be primarily academics, artists, or activists being directly involved in the production of collections, media (e.g., new media apps or forms of display), and exhibitions. The nature of museum work is, inevitably, collaborative, but in some cases it also involves more explicit attempts to work with those who have had little previous engagement in museum worlds and draws on methodology and ethical insight from disciplines such as social and cultural anthropology to do so. Such actual engagement – coupled with what we see as more fluid traffic between academia and museums also powers new forms of theorizing and practice. This productive mobility affords museum studies its characteristic – and, in our view, especially exciting – dynamic.

## Organization of the *International Handbooks*

As we originally planned these *International Handbooks*, dividing their coverage into the four volumes of Theory, Practice, Media, and Transformations (originally envisaged as Futures) made good sense as a way of grouping key areas of work within the field. Our idea was that *Theory* would bring together work that showed central areas of theorizing that have shaped museum studies so far, together with those that might do so in the future. We envisaged *Practice* as attending especially to areas of actual museum work, especially those that have tended to be ignored in past theorizing, not in order to try to reinstate a theory/practice division but, rather, to take the opportunity to transcend it through theorizing these too. We saw *Media* as the appropriate label to cover the crucially important area for museums of their architecture, spaces, and uses of diverse media primarily, though not exclusively, for display. *Transformations* was intended to direct its attention especially to some of the most important social, cultural, political, and economic developments that are shaping and look likely to reshape museums in the future.

In many ways, what has resulted fits this original remit. We always knew that there would inevitably be areas of convergence: in particular, that theory can derive from practice, and vice versa; that the development and expansion of social media is propelling some of the most significant transformations in museums, and so forth. Yet it is probably true to say that there are more synergies than we had